The Potential of the Jazz Record

Peter Elsdon

We all know this so well there is hardly any point in saying it. Without the sound recording, jazz as we currently conceive it is almost unthinkable. The history of jazz, it is sometimes said, is a history in sound recordings. There is probably also no point rehearsing all of the arguments that address the problematic aspects of recordings. For instance, Krin Gabbard's identification of its role in what he calls "the myth of jazz's autonomy", his comments on its association with canon-building, or Jed Rasula's essay which labels recordings in its title as a "Seductive Menace" (Gabbard 1996; Rasula 1995; see also introduction to Gabbard 1995). But at the same time, we cannot escape the sound recording, even if we might want to. Aside from its role as a documentary medium, no matter how problematic that might be, recordings are still the primary means through which listeners encounter jazz. The recording remains embedded in jazz culture, at the centre of how we think about the music. In this paper, I want to talk about the potential of the jazz record. This is not to avoid the problematic aspects of records, but rather to suggest that their potential as a point of focus for inquiry far outweighs these negatives. In particular I want to explore a kind of repositioning of the recording that allows it to illuminate a variety of cultural and aesthetic preconceptions about jazz.

There was perhaps a time when jazz scholars thought of the potential of a record purely in terms of its documentary function; the idea that records are records *of* performances. This is to see the record as a musical text that offers itself for analysis. As Matthew Butterfield says, the analysis of jazz actually tends to affirm the idea that it exists in recorded form (Butterfield 2001/2002). Or rather, analysing jazz is not a purely objective exercise, but is often bound up with a set of preconceptions about what the recording represents, how it functions, and so on. But not always.

A more nuanced view sees recordings as texts that mediate music for listeners through a range of technological, social and cultural mechanisms. In this sense the record can act a little like a mirror that reflects outwards. Through its reflection we can view the way different cultural conceptions, systems of classification, ascriptions of value and the like, operate. As Tony Whyton, whose book *Beyond A Love Supreme* is a fine contemporary example of what I am talking about, says, "Jazz recordings… are powerful cultural artifacts, that can affect people's lives…

Recordings can be understood both as fixed works that are open to interpretation and as performative texts that can be played in any given context, giving rise to new meanings and uses for music." (Whyton 2013: 5) So the jazz record can be the central point in a discourse or debate that is much broader and wide-ranging.

The record I want to concentrate on in this paper, Keith Jarrett's *The Köln Concert*, is one I have recently written quite a lot about. In this context, I want to start merely by repeating a couple of the most well known facts about the album: It is the best-selling solo piano record of all time, and the best-selling solo jazz record. Reportedly its sales helped bankroll the ECM label through the later part of the 1970s. Along the way the record acquired many associations and meanings, which often may have seemed to have little to do with the music. To give one example, which aptly demonstrates how the status of this particular record has come to be seen as problematic, recently the *Jazz Journal* reviewed my book on *The Köln Concert*, writing that, "since the Koln Concert is not really a jazz record, it does not respond well to jazz criticism and analysis" (Adams 2013: 14). All of which prompts a lot of questions. Why is this not a jazz record – or is it less of a jazz record than any of Jarrett's other solo records? What is a jazz record? Why is it necessary to think that there should be such a thing as a jazz record, as distinct from any other kind of record? In this example the reason that the status of this record is problematic has a lot to do with the history of how it has been used and treated, rather more than anything to do with the music of the record. And that demands thinking of records in a certain way.

If we think of recordings as culturally-mediated texts, then not only do records store music, but music only comes to mean something when records are put to use. We might think of that use primarily as listening, of course, but as I will argue later on there are different ways of listening, and records offer many kinds of potential. And music's role in this is to afford the listener certain ways of participating with the recording – whether listening to it on a pair of headphones, sitting in a chair, or having it on as background music while cooking. Music is thus mediated by the contexts in which it is used, and records are objects which allow music to be brought into existence wherever and whenever chosen.

The consequence of thinking this way is that what we think of as *The Köln Concert* cannot be reduced to the physical artefact of the LP or CD, or to the sonic form the music takes when we play the CD or LP. What is it then? Georgina Born, for instance, talks of a "constellatory conception of music's multiple mediations", or of "music's many simultaneous forms of existence" (Born 2005: 13). This implies thinking about a record in a very different way; it allows us to see how music comes into existence in a variety of contexts. And to treat *The Köln Concert* this way turns out to be rather interesting. A series of clips available on the video sharing site YouTube demonstrate the range of different kinds of contexts in

Poster: Nano Moretti, *Caro Diario* (1993)

which we can see the record having an existence.

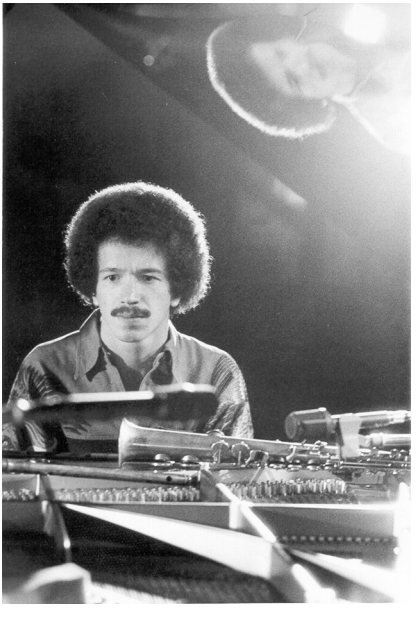
In one film available on YouTube, a busker performs the music from the recording on an upright piano outside Strasbourg Cathedral. In another we see part of *The Köln Concert* used as the soundtrack for Nano Moretti's 1993 film *Caro Diario* (Dear Diary)[1]. There are a number of films that demonstrate the emergence of a tradition of performing Jarrett's Cologne improvisations in a concert hall environment, including performances by the Italian pianist Fausto Bongelli, and the Polish pianist Tomasz Trzcinski[2]. Other representations of the piece in online videos include performers who do not set out to recreate the improvisation note for note, but amplify it in other ways, both visually and musically. Sometimes this can be in the addition of visuals to the music – slow-changing stills of landscape for example, a common theme on YouTube. In other instances, versions are characterised either by the addition of electronic parts to the music, or the use of music of *The Köln Concert* as the basis for new improvisations[3].

In only one of the instances I have described do we hear the actual audio of Jarrett's recording, and that is in the Moretti film. And yet each one of these instances is, in its own way, a *Köln Concert*. They fall into quite distinct categories,

1 Footage of the busker can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=fB8AGX2jg9I (accessed 21 November 2013). A clip of the Moretti film can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wOy881kh1A (accessed 21 November 2013).

2 The Bongelli version can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=0T_sgCotXFw. (accessed 21 November 2013). A live performance by Trzinski can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FqH9mtxJnQ (accessed 21 November 2013). Trzinski recorded a version of *The Köln Concert* on his album *Blue Mountains* (2006), and subsequent releases including *Beyond the Koln Concert,* present music which is, apparently, inspired by Jarrett's 1975 improvisations. See tomasz-trzcinski.zimbalam.com/ (accessed 28 November 2013).

3 See for instance www.youtube.com/watch?v=WdedWTJ3FsQ (accessed 21 November 2013), visuals www.youtube.com/watch?v=68XZpUUxCd0 (accessed 21 November 2013), and www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5G14ioiyMU (accessed 21 November 2013).



Keith Jarrett, *The Köln Concert* (1975)

or what Born calls "constellatory conceptions". The Moretti film aside, these are all versions or recreations of one kind or another. They all involve various kinds of performance – in concert, in a studio, with electronics, and so on. And there are the visuals, which I will come to in a minute.

In order to think about these performances, we have to consider the mediation of notation. As is well-known, Jarrett was involved in authorising a published transcription of the record, which came out in 1991 (Jarrett 1991). It is fairly safe to assume that most or all of these versions are prompted and facilitated by that transcription. Notation in the form of transcription is far from unusual in jazz, but it is relatively rare for purposes other than as a pedagogic tool. So *The Köln Concert* is perhaps unusual in that sense. We might also consider the complicated position that a theoretical explanation of this process creates. These new versions of the record are all "performances" of a transcription, which is in itself a partial and imperfect attempt to represent in notation an improvisation which was transmitted in sonic form, and was therefore in itself imperfect to begin with. So everything is a representation of a representation, multiply mediated.

By looking at *The Köln Concert's* musical dissemination in the form of how musicians engage with it, we start to find some interesting things. There are concert performances, a busker playing it (apparently from memory), a version mixing piano with synthesised sounds, and I could have mentioned multiple other arrangements, performances, and so on. What is important is the way in which these versions reflect on the strange status of the record – as something that has the potential to afford all of these versions. The existence of the transcription makes these different versions possible, and thereby turns *The Köln Concert* into a kind of "do it yourself" musical text anyone can have a go at. This fact also reflects something about the music of the record, namely the way in which the rhythmic and harmonic language is heavily redolent of a lot of other music being made in the same decade. It is partly for that reason that the record allows this range of musical responses. Seeing the record this way, not as the end point of a musical process, but as the start of a subsequent series of musical interactions and dialogues, might be seen to challenge the whole focus of a record-based jazz studies. But equally, these dialogues would not exist in the same form *without* the record.

The other theme that emerges in considering these representations is prompted by the visual imagery that is used on a couple of occasions, including in the Nano Moretti film. I could have picked any number of other versions freely available on the internet with stills or video of landscape, set against Jarrett's music. Why landscape, and the outdoors? The answer is that this is a modern visual trope peculiar to the latter half of the twentieth century, which seems to have emerged during the 1970s. The imagery of nature is a modern version of the pastoral – the pastoral as soothing, calming, nostalgic, yearning in this case. It is imagery that has

become associated with a range of music, particularly that sometimes called mood music or new age music. And it is no coincidence that such imagery came to be associated with two particular record labels during the 1970s: ECM and Windham Hill, as I have discussed in my book. But what I am interested in here is that those images come in the form of a response to the music, and they tell us something about one of the multiple modes of the record's existence. And in this case there is a strong link to the idea of music as functional, especially with therapeutic value. It is in this sense, when we look at the contemporary market for music designed for such purposes, that we find exactly the same visual tropes being used.

Consider the further evidence for the link of this record to such an idea. I have seen it recommended in a number of "self-help" manuals, and indeed even in a book called *You Bring Out the Music in Me*: *Music in Nursing Homes* (Karras 1987). Here it is recommended as a record to be played by nursing home staff when the mood desired is nostalgic/sentimental/soothing. The record also appears in a number of other publications that might be described as "self-help" books. There are also similar kinds of responses which emerge through a range of poetry, including a poem by Robert Bly entitled "Listening to the Koln Concert" (Bly 1986: 191-192). It is also clear based on correspondence I have had with some fans of the record, that for some listeners this record serves an enormously important practical function, in accompanying work or other functional tasks. Some listeners have the record on repeatedly, and listen to it thousands of times over a number of years.

It is worth thinking about the implications of this in terms of the act of listening. As Matthew Butterfield suggests, in premising the activity of analysis on recordings, we also make assumptions about a particular kind of listening, namely what we might call "active" listening (Butterfield 2001/2002: 334). In fact, most musicology is built on exactly this assumption. This is to differentiate listening from hearing: listening requires intentional active attention, whereas hearing is passive. But premising analysis on active listening is to ignore the reality of how many listeners engage with music.

But passive listening (or just hearing) has implications for how we think about records. As Matthew Butterfield says, "In the 'muzakification' of our listening habits, music recedes rapidly into the background of our social experience of musical situations rather than constituting the main line of activity in the foreground of those circumstances." (Butterfield 2001/2002: 334) The implication seems to be that with passive listening, music is thereby devalued. We find exactly this kind of trend at work in the way so many musicians and musical organisations have been actively hostile to the idea of muzak or elevator music, as Joseph Lanza demonstrates (Lanza 1995). What this reveals is that part of the problem with *The Köln Concert*, part of why the *Jazz Journal* should say it is not really a jazz record at

all, is that it has become associated with a certain kind of listening which is seen to devalue it. This reveals I think that the suspicion often expressed about the *Köln Concert*, and indeed expressed by Jarrett himself, has to do with the way the record has been listened to.

While we would do well to observe the way in which these judgements about listening have an effect on the status of this record, we ought also to acknowledge the complex realities of the situation. Put simply, the assumption made about active listening and the construction of the record as the musical object in analysis, also runs the risk of ignoring inconvenient truths about the way jazz has been marketed and recorded throughout its history. I could spend some time here arguing about the way in which some of ECM's output was and is seen as little different from that produced by a whole range of artists associated with Windham Hill and the New Age-ideal, which has proved highly distasteful for most jazz commentators. Indeed, pianist Matthew Shipp recently characterised Jarrett's solo playing of the 1970s as "pseudo-jazz/New Age meandering", a remark which while probably offensive to Jarrett fans, also has a lot of truth in its characterisation of the fluid boundary between jazz and other instrumental music of the time (Shipp 2013). But I am going to suggest that this goes much further than the *Köln Concert*.

The widespread construction of jazz as an art music has had a range of consequences, but one, as demonstrated for instance by David Ake's account of the importance of Louis Jordan, is that certain figures are easily overlooked because they do not fit in with a larger narrative archetype (Ake 2002: 42-61). As Ake suggests with Jordan, the issue that comes into play is that of the popular versus the serious, a binary used to police the boundaries of jazz for historiographical purposes. But this binary can also be understood in terms of the act of listening. Just as these ideas of serious and popular are often rooted in musical style, they also imply two different kinds of listening; one active, the other passive. Because jazz scholars have tended to premise their approach to records on the idea that they are musical texts, considerations of musical style naturally come before the issue of how listeners engage with recordings. We forget, as Tony Whyton suggests, that records are commodities, made to be sold (Whyton 2013: 44). That simple fact has implications for any record-based studies, in that it demands an understanding of how listening functions.

Once the issue is seen this way, it is possible to look at a record's potential quite differently. Consider for example the case of Paul Desmond's *Desmond Blue*, recorded in 1961 for RCA. This is one of a whole number of instrumentalist-with-strings albums produced during the time, the most famous forebear being *Charlie Parker with Strings*, made in 1949. The cover of the album proclaims "A great saxophonist in a new setting", with the cover image being of a woman's

Record cover: Paul Desmond, *Desmond Blue* (1961)

face, lit in soft pastel covers, looking pensive but relaxed. The whole imagery of the cover emphasises not the musicianship of the performers or the dynamism of the music. Instead it presents a subtle idea about listening instead, by presenting a figure whose demeanour suggests a listening act that is both relaxed and pleasurable. But at the same time, the kind of musical setting *Desmond Blue* presents is one that, seen from a certain point of view, is fraught with a certain danger. Take this review of the reissue in *Jazz Times*:

> "On the surface, the atmospheric, occasionally overly dramatic writing coupled with Desmond's subdued approach gives the music a veneer that seems more appropriate for film…" (Ferguson 1998)

What is being implied here is the idea of music as soundtrack, and that also implies a change in function; that it is pushed to the point of becoming subordinate to something else, rather than the centre of attention. Orchestral arrangements like this are sometimes seen by jazz writers as a distraction, a sign of the commercial intentions of the record, and it is *despite* them that the jazz fan can enjoy what is on offer. But these dreamy string backgrounds and the soft pastel cover do not just raise issues of musical style, but of listening. The lush orchestrations foster a particular kind of culturally-understood musical listening – the record as a backdrop for something else, exactly the kind of function the *Jazz Times* seems to caution against.

But I am not trying to argue against the importance of *Desmond Blue* as a record at all, quite the opposite. I am arguing that by and large we miss a huge amount of the jazz record's potential when we think of it solely in terms of the qualities of active listening that it may encourage, and when we analyse it entirely in terms of musical style. And while a record like *Desmond Blue* does not get written out of jazz history, what does is its significance in terms of the cultural value and usage of recordings, as artefacts that form parts of listeners' lives. Indeed, this whole history of the jazz record as something that was deliberately created and marketed with this sort of listening in mind, is one that we downplay or conveniently ignore altogether.

So, to offer some concluding thoughts, I am trying to suggest that we certainly should not abandon the recording in the face of cautions about what it represents. But we should seek to understand the recording as culturally mediated. Placed this way, by focusing not only on the recording but the way listeners respond to it, we can trace some of the underlying cultural conceptions through which jazz is understood. The recording acts as a mirror – a sonic mirror of a performance, but also a mirror onto a wider set of discourses. It also allows us to begin to see the ways in which the act of listening plays an important part in thinking about jazz, an aspect that certainly needs to be considered in greater detail.

Abstract Man spricht schon mal davon, dass es den Jazz ohne die Schallplatte gar nicht gäbe, oder aber, dass die Geschichte des Jazz in Wahrheit die Geschichte seiner Tonträger sei. Solche Positionen erinnern immer wieder an die Grenzen und die Unzulänglichkeiten der Schallplatte, verglichen mit dem Liveerlebnis. Und doch ist für viele Hörer die wichtigste Jazzerfahrung eben jene des Hörens von Tonträgern, egal in welcher Form. Peter Elsdon fokussiert sich auf das Beispiel eines einzelnen Künstlers, Keith Jarrett, um die Potentiale des Tonträgers im Jazz zu untersuchen und zu zeigen, wie Schallplatten uns ein Verständnis für verschiedene ästhetische Rahmenbedingungen dieser Musik vermitteln können. Mit Bezug auf das Album *The Köln Concert* untersucht Elsdon konkret, inwieweit eine Platte als Soundobjekt von den Hörern auf unterschiedliche Weise rezipiert werden kann und weist dabei nach, wie Debatten über Ästhetik und musikalischen Wert oft entscheidend dafür verantwortlich sind, wie wir Musik hören.

Adams 2013: Simon Adams: review of *Keith Jarrett's The Köln Concert* by Peter Elsdon, in: *Jazz Journal*, June 2013, p. 14

Ake 2002: David Ake: *Jazz Cultures*, Los Angeles 2002 (University of California Press)

Bly 1986: Robert Bly: *Selected Poems*, New York 1986 (Harper and Row)

Born 2005: Georgina Born: On Musical Mediation. Ontology, Technology and Creativity, in: *Twentieth Century Music*, 2/1 (2005), p. 7-36

Butterfield 2001/2002: Matthew Butterfield: Music Analysis and the Social Life of Jazz Recordings, in: *Current Musicology*, 71-73, Spring 2001/Spring 2002, p. 324-352

Elsdon 2013: Peter Elsdon: *Keith Jarrett's The Köln Concert*, New York 2013 (Oxford University Press)

Ferguson 1998: Jim Ferguson: Paul Desmond – "The Complete Paul Desmond RCA Victor Recordings featuring Jim Hall" (CMG), in: Jazz Times, Apr. 1998, jazztimes.com/articles/10200-the-complete-paul-desmond-rca-victor-recordings-featuring-jim-hall-paul-desmond (accessed 21 November 2013)

Gabbard 1995: Krin Gabbard (ed.): *Jazz Among the Discourses*, Durham 1995 (Duke University Press)

Gabbard 1996: Krin Gabbard: *Jammin' at the Margins. Jazz and the American Cinema,* Chicago 1996 (University of Chicago Press)

Jarrett 1991: Keith Jarrett: *The Köln Concert, Original Transcription*, Mainz 1991 (Schott Publishing)

Karras 1987: Beckie Karras (ed.): *You Bring Out the Music in Me: Music in Nursing Homes*, New York 1987 (Haworth Press)

Lanza 1995: Joseph Lanza: *Elevator Music*, New York 1995 (Picador)

Radula 1995: Jed Rasula, The Media of Memory. The Seductive Menace of Records in Jazz History, in: Krin Gabbard (ed.): *Jazz Among the Discourses*, Durham 1995 (Duke University Press), p. 134-162

Shipp 2013: Matthew Shipp: Matthew Shipp >< Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock, Jack DeJohnette, in: The Talkhouse, 23. Jul. 2013 (review of the Jarrett's trio's release *Somewhere)*, thetalkhouse.com/reviews/view/matthew-shipp-keith-jarrett-gary-peacock-jack-dejohnette (accessed 21 November 2013)

Whyton 2013: Tony Whyton, *Beyond A Love Supreme: John Coltrane and the Legacy of an Album*, New York 2013 (Oxford University Press)